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My Lai Massacre Planned, Sources Claim

CIA Linked to 1968 Operation

By Jack Taylor

The My Lai massacre of 1968 was planned and coordinated with the Central Intelligence Agency in a deliberate attempt to wipe out an entire village and its civilian population as a lesson to the enemy, certain Pentagon sources say they have concluded.

The assault, in which nearly 450 Vietnamese civilians were slain, actually was the second CIA-planned attack on the same village, one of the sources who was in on the planning also disclosed for the first time.

Subsequent actions by the Army, including charges against 25 persons connected with the massacre or its cover-up, were designed only to quiet public indignation once the incident was brought to light and were manipulated to avoid implicating either the CIA or military policy, the sources said.

When the Army was forced to investigate the cover-up of the massacre, it selected a general with extensive CIA background to head the probe in order to insure that the investigation would steer clear of that aspect, the sources added.

That investigation—the so-called Peers inquiry, headed by Lt. Gen. William R. Peers, a former CIA officer—was branded by one of the sources as a “smoke screen.”

Possible CIA involvement in the massacre may be the reason the Army has continued to suppress most of the information about the incident and its investigation in the face of repeated demands for its disclosure, including more than three years of requests from The Oklahoman for a variety of documents and information.

“A lot of things were done (in South Vietnam) that should not have been done.”

—William E. Colby, executive director of CIA, in 1971 testimony before congressional subcommittee

One Pentagon source said he has reason to believe everyone in the chain of command, including former Army Chief of Staff Gen. William C. Westmoreland, U.S. commander in Vietnam at the time, knew about the incident because it was “one small aspect of broader policy.”

The Army has always denied knowledge of the incident until it was brought to the attention of congressmen by an ex-CIA in 1969. The CIA subsequently denied any connection.

Two Army general, told of these conclusions from the Pentagon sources, said: “That might be some explanation for it. I can't visualize it, though I guess anything is possible.”

The sources include five Army officers who have been deeply involved in the My Lai affair and who have had access to secret documents about the massacre. Two of the sources were involved in the planning and execution of the operation itself.

“I believe the Army and the Defense Department are perpetuating a conspiracy about the most serious aspects of the massacre and even more serious and numerous atrocities committed by American troops. One of the sources said other incidents “make My Lai look like a Sunday school picnic.”

All of the sources agreed to talk after being guaranteed anonymity. “Don't blow the whistle,” one said, “because they'll destroy me.”

An intensive, year-long investigation by The Oklahoman has uncovered considerable circumstantial evidence supporting these sources' conclusion, although there is no explicit proof in any documents available to the public.

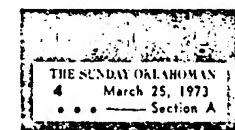
The sources say evidence within the Army—what has become a public record and what is still secret—indicates that because of the military's planning for the My Lai operation was vital.

There is no single document setting down the CIA military operation in black and white, the sources say.

They add that any documents with more substance would only exist within the CIA.

How such an incident as My Lai could occur is better understood when viewed from the perspective of military and political complexities of the time.

The assault on My Lai by infantrymen of the Americal Division's Task Force Barker came during the period of the most intense fighting of the



war and in an area where the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong were most strongly entrenched.

It was a time when military policy changed, almost unnoticed, to permit the fighting to become considerably more destructive, a time when the restraints previously imposed on the use of firepower in populated areas were dropped for the first time.

It was a time of intense pressures—tactically, strategically and psychologically. A newly elected government in Saigon was only beginning to take root and Washington was beginning to have second thoughts about massive American involvement in the war.

It was then that a proud Gen. Westmoreland reportedly became bitter and resentful over his fruitless struggle to obtain more than 200,000 reinforcements to his half-million man army could regain the initiative and win the war.

It was also then, former presidential adviser Walt W. Rostow recalls, that the credibility gap began to widen between the assessments of the situation by Westmoreland and those by others.

During that time, the threat appeared most ominous in the five northern provinces of South Vietnam called I Corps Tactical Zone. More than 2.7 million people lived there, nearly 90 per cent within 15 miles of the coast. A few hundred of them lived in a hamlet called My Lai.

When the military situation in I Corps deteriorated in the spring of 1967, Westmoreland shifted troops to form Task Force Oregon, a provisional division to reinforce Quang Ngai Province, the home of My Lai.

Task Force Oregon was redesignated as the Americal Division in September and Westmoreland gained approval of reinforcing it with the 11th Light Infantry Brigade from Hawaii two months earlier than originally planned.

The 11th—from which the units were drawn that would form Task Force Barker and ultimately raid My Lai—shipped out for Vietnam in December, despite warnings that it wasn't ready for combat.

“Perhaps the most serious criticism of the PRU (Provisional Reconnaissance Units) is that the whole concept and operation are copied after the Communists and that by copying their extra-legal methods we lose any claim we have to the ‘just cause.’”

—National Security Study Memorandum of 1969

With primary concern for I Corps, Westmoreland opened a temporary headquarters known as MACV Forward and sent his deputy, Gen. Creighton Abrams, to take charge. Abrams ultimately followed Westmoreland as commander in Vietnam and then as Army chief of staff, a post he now holds.

MACV Forward converted in early 1968 to a corps headquarters with its command function under the control of the III Marine Amphibious Force, commanded by Lt. Gen. Robert E. Cushman Jr. Cushman later

became deputy director of the CIA, then was promoted to full general and named commander of the Marine Corps, his current post.

Just to the south, in II Corps, Lt. Gen. William R. Peers was assuming command of I Field Force, My Lai, located in the extreme south of I Corps, was on the edge of Peers' area of responsibility.

Then came the enemy's Tet Offensive. In late January of 1968, more than 84,000 Communist troops attacked 39 of 44 provincial capitals, five of six autonomous cities, 71 of 242 district capitals and 50 hamlets. Gen. Earle Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, reported to President Johnson a month later that the crisis in I Corps was one of three principal problems facing Westmoreland.

“MACV has been forced to deploy 50 per cent of all U.S. maneuver battalions into I Corps, to meet the threat there, while the enemy synchronizes an attack against Khe Sanh/Hue-Quang Tri with an offensive in the Highlands and around Saigon while keeping the pressure on throughout the remainder of the country. MACV will be hard pressed to meet adequately all threats,” Wheeler reported. “Under these circumstances, we must be prepared to accept some reverses.”

Gen. Wheeler believed the most important goal of the enemy offensive was to take over the countryside. In many areas, intelligence analysts concluded, they might already have been successful. The attack on the cities and towns had forced a withdrawal of allied troops from rural areas. Pacification—winning the “hearts and minds” of the peasants—suffered a near fatal blow.

Pacification was always considered the real key to winning the war. It was not a new concept. It had been tried with varying degrees of failure since the late 1950s, including one program in the Saigon area initiated by Westmoreland.

During the Guam conference in March 1967, President Johnson decided to place the U.S. pacification role under the overall authority of the military. Westmoreland assumed the burden in May, although the actual direction was the task of Robert “Blowtorch” Komer, director of Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS).

Komer spent 14 years in the CIA before becoming a deputy to McGeorge Bundy, special presidential assistant for national security affairs. In 1952, he was named special assistant for the “peaceful reconstruction of Vietnam” by President Johnson in 1966, then became Westmoreland's deputy for pacification—the CORDS job—in 1967.

Komer's successor and the man in the CORDS job when the My Lai massacre was under investigation was William E. Colby, another long-time CIA man who was once CIA's station chief in Saigon and former head of the agency's Far East Division.

Colby, who is now executive director of the CIA, told a congressional subcommittee in 1971 that during 1967 and '68 “a lot of things were done (in South Vietnam) that should not have been done.”

The drastic change in who would direct the pacification effort was made for three primary reasons: The 16,000 hamlets and 2,000 villages in South Vietnam's 44 provinces created a complex management problem beyond the scope of the civilian agencies, military and civilian tasks were so intimately interwoven that normal coordination wouldn't do, and, according to Rostow, “Johnson knew that the military would take the pacification effort much more seriously if its own chain of command was directly engaged.”

As the allies struggled to regain lost ground in the pacification program, military troops supported by artillery and air strikes conducted search and destroy operations with a frequency and ferocity never before witnessed by the peasants.

One source must conclude that much of Vietnam had become a free fire zone.

Westmoreland apparently was aware of the dangers of mixing military might with pacification. He once said: “U.S. troops, by virtue of

their ethnic background, are not as effective as RVNAF (South Vietnamese) troops in a pacification role. When deployed in highly populated areas, U.S. troops must be used with discrimination.”

But one of the problems during Tet, many concluded, was that the South Vietnamese wouldn't carry their load. This was particularly true of the 2nd ARVN Division—the unit whose area of responsibility included My Lai.

“You can't get at the enemy unless you get at them where they're at. There isn't any way to get them but level the villages they're located in. . . I don't think it makes a tremendous amount of difference. All the people have to do to keep their villages from being destroyed is make sure that their hamlet isn't a fort for Charlie (the Viet Cong).”

—James A. May, senior American advisor for CORDS program in Quang Ngai Province, in 1967

The immense destruction associated with American firepower naturally lapped over into the pacification program. One veteran officer concluded at the time that “search-and-destroy tactics against VC-controlled areas have degenerated into savagery.”

Komer, the pacification program's head, reportedly said during a 1968 interview that destruction of villages “has happened so often, the old tragedy, that the peasant takes it with stoicism and resignation. Strange thing, they don't seem to get upset.”

Komer worked through more than 5,000 American advisers, 75 per cent of them military, 25 per cent civilian—including CIA.

The key to making pacification work was considered to be rooting out the VCI—Viet Cong infrastructure, the enemy cadresmen who formed the nucleus of the Communist threat. I Corps, again, was a sore point.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded in early 1968 that partly because of the obvious and not wholly anticipated strength of the Viet Cong infrastructure, there can be no prospect of a quick military solution to the aggression in South Vietnam.

Under the circumstances, we should give intensive study to the development of a new strategic guidance to Gen. Westmoreland. This guidance should make clear the fact that he cannot be expected either to destroy the enemy forces or to rout them completely from South Vietnam. The kind of American commitment that would be required to achieve these military objectives cannot even be estimated. There is no reason to believe that it could be done by an additional 200,000 American troops or double or triple that quantity.”

The principal method of attacking the VCI was the CIA-inspired Phoenix program, begun in December 1967, with a reluctant Saigon government lending its support only some seven months later.

Colby told a congressional subcommittee that the Phoenix program received “advice and assistance” through CORDS, the civilian

linking a direct link to Gen. Westmoreland's headquarters.

Phoenix was the outgrowth of unilateral CIA program introduced several years earlier that was known as Counter-Terror. “CT, as it was called, employed the same method as the Communists—ranging from assassination to intimidation—and the South Vietnamese government never recognized the project.

The pressures on the Phoenix operatives, especially during the program's early stages and at its height of the fighting, were immense. It was not surprising that innocent civilians were caught up in the Phoenix web, as was acknowledged in a National Security Study Memorandum written in 1969 which came to light last May.

“Statistics on Communist political cadre ‘neutralized,’ i.e., killed, captured, or defecting, are available through the Phoenix (Phung Hoang) program, the keystone of the current effort to attack the Communist infrastructure,” the memorandum stated. But it added: “There is some problem with the statistics of the Phoenix program. Prior to August 1966 the reports of the number of Communists neutralized were not thoroughly screened to eliminate non-Communist.”

“Correction of this data on the basis of the experience in the last part of the year, when tighter screening was introduced, reduces the official total of 15,700 to around 14,500,” according to a recent DoD (Defense Department) study. The same study notes that even the revised figure are believed to include non-Communists or part-time Communists, especially as report-padding may have increased recently under the pressure of attempting to reach the quota set for the Accelerated Pacification Campaign.”

The same memorandum gives additional insight into how the U.S. pushed the South Vietnamese into supporting the program and how simple, covert operations soon turned to large-scale operations of the type that would closely parallel an operation such as the assault on My Lai.

“Although the program was launched in December 1967, Saigon level Vietnamese cooperation was minimal until Thieu, after considerable American prodding, issued a presidential decree in July 1968 to fully directing that the network be set up,” the memorandum, known as NSMM-1, stated. It went on to add:

“In addition to the problem raised by the nature of the organization, certain problems have arisen from the nature of the effort. . . Most easy targets have already been hit and there are indications that some of the intelligence agencies involved are already beginning to exhaust their data bases. . .

“As easy targets disappear reliance upon large-scale cordon and search operations and less on rifle shot efforts based on detailed intelligence; cordon and search operation may get VC supporters and guerrillas, but rarely members of the infrastructure.”

The memorandum also gives an example of how CIA generated intelligence through the Phoenix program was linked to large-scale, conventional military operations.

The Viet Cong infrastructure was said to have been “disrupted substantially” in some areas of I Corps. “One of the largest anti-VCI operations so far conducted in I Corps—Meade River—was generated as a result of information obtained from



Colby

Cushman

Komer

Westmoreland